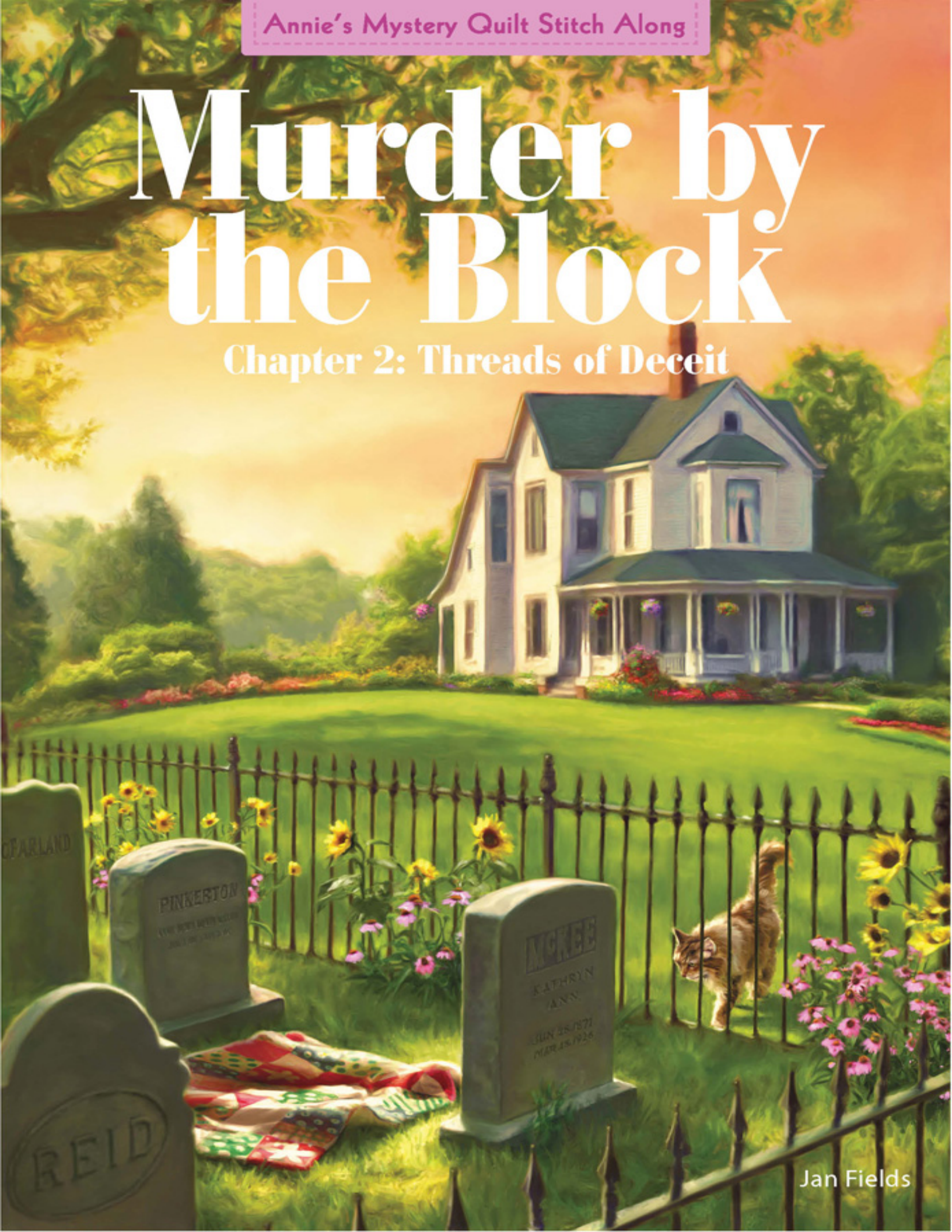


Annie's Mystery Quilt Stitch Along

Murder by the Block

Chapter 2: Threads of Deceit

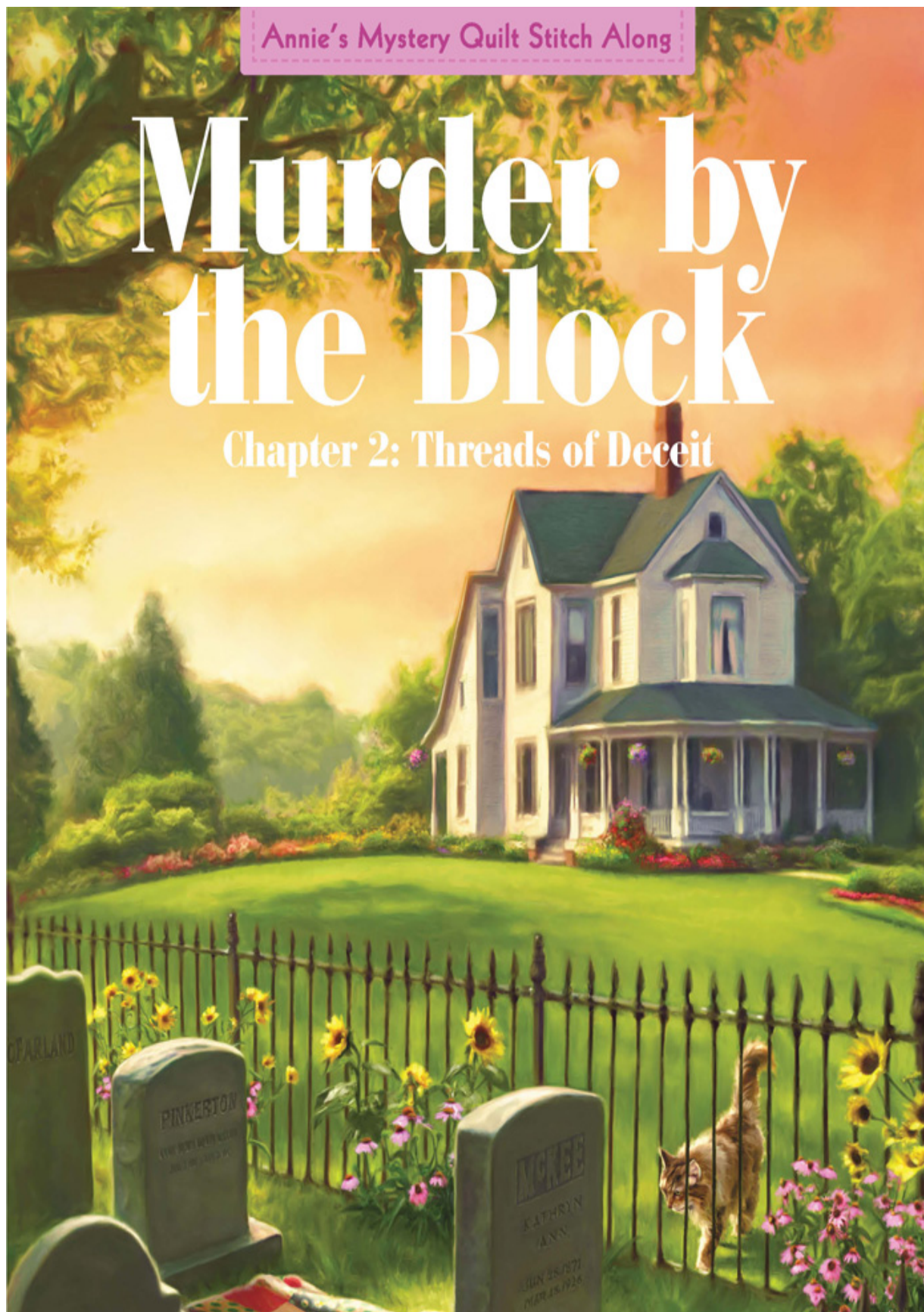


Jan Fields

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Chapter 2: Threads of Deceit





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2

Threads of Deceit

April's reaction to touching the hand was instant. She scrambled away, putting more space between her and whoever had been left inside the crumbling structure as quickly as possible. She gaped in horror at the still hand before calming enough to creep back and check for a pulse. The temperature of the skin had strongly suggested there wouldn't be one, but she felt the need to be sure.

As she pressed her shaking fingers to the wrist, she noticed the base of the palm was skinned. Like the manicure, it gave clues about the woman's last hours, but April was too shaken to make anything of it. The detail simply flitted through her photographer's mind like a snapshot.

Moments later she backed away from the mausoleum, knowing with certainty that whoever was in the mausoleum was beyond help. She pulled out her phone and called the police. Her hands still trembled—but less than before. She managed to keep her composure as she described where she was and what she'd found. The police dispatcher asked her name and she gave it.

"Okay, April, you're doing great," the warm voice over the phone said. "Can you look around and tell me if you see anyone else there?"

April did as the voice instructed. No one knelt by the old gravestones or wandered the paths. "I think I'm alone. I

can't see the entire cemetery from here, but I can see most of it."

"If you feel safe, then I need you to wait there. A unit is on the way. Do you want me to stay on the phone with you until they arrive?"

"No," April said. She was still a little shaky, but she didn't want to seem like a hysteric. "I'm fine. I'll wait here."

"If you feel as if you're in any danger, don't hesitate to move to a safer place."

"I'm good."

Once she ended the call, she backed up and saw the quilt lying in a crumpled wad on the ground. She must have dragged it when she was scooting backward in her panic. She bent and picked it up. As she'd noticed before, it was handmade and worn, but not tattered. There were smudges of dirt, and she resisted the urge to wipe at it.

She realized it could have been wrapped around the body and quickly draped it over a nearby stone. She decided to snap a series of photos of the quilt. The police would take it from her as soon as they arrived, and she wanted a record of what she'd seen.

As she took photo after photo, she realized that she may have found a life quilt, made up of fabrics that were meaningful to a single person. One of the blocks was made of a baby print with cheerful ducks. Another one was stitched with white satin and lace. "Were you a wedding dress?" she whispered. She looked back at the pale hand. "Was this your life?"

She shifted the quilt several times, careful to capture every square in at least one photo. She also took photos of any dirt on the quilt. Then she thought of something and flipped the quilt over again to examine the fabric. There were no blood stains on the quilt blocks. Perhaps it meant the woman had passed of natural causes.

But inside a mausoleum? That seemed highly unlikely, but she could think of stranger things that had happened.

Maybe the woman saw the damaged building and felt she had to see inside . . . and she encountered a venomous snake. It was early spring, so most of the snakes would still be holed up for the winter. But perhaps one had thought the damaged mausoleum was a good place to winter. That thought caused April to back away still farther, though she chided herself for letting her imagination run away with her. The theory was undeniably absurd.

By the time the police arrived, tromping through the cemetery and calling her name, April had folded the quilt and left it on the stone. She stood well away as if to suggest she had *not* been handling a piece of evidence. She felt relief wash through her when she recognized both of the police officers.

Officer Hal Anderson went to the same church as April, and she knew his wife, Chloe, well. He was tall and fit, with broad shoulders and thick upper arms that strained the seams on his uniform shirt. In contrast, the woman directly behind Hal was whip-thin. Officer Jennifer Cooper had been in New Holly less than a year. April had met her at the local bookstore not long after she'd arrived in town, and they'd been friendly acquaintances ever since.

"April?" Hal said. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "A little shaky, if I'm honest."

"You're doing great," Jennifer assured her. "You've had a nasty shock."

"Can you tell us exactly what happened?"

April explained that she'd come to the cemetery to shoot a few photos. "I specifically wanted to check on this mausoleum because it's been crumbling for a while."

"I've seen some of the photos in the paper," Hal said. "I read your piece on the need for historical restoration of little-known structures. Chloe thought it was great."

April felt a small swell of pride. "Thanks."

He wrinkled his nose. "I thought it sounded expensive. We have better places to spend the town's money." Then he

gestured toward the mausoleum with his pen. "But at the moment, I'm a believer. We don't need the homeless crawling into mausoleums at night."

Jennifer had moved closer to the arm. "I don't think this lady was homeless. That is a pricey manicure."

"And I think the quilt she had with her was valuable," April said, gesturing toward the quilt. "Not worth thousands or anything, but it is a beautiful piece."

Hal nodded. "How did the quilt get over there?"

April explained about finding the quilt sticking out of the mausoleum long before she spotted the arm. "I believe that the arm only fell through the hole because I removed the quilt."

"Too bad you didn't leave it in place," Hal said. "You'll have contaminated the evidence."

"Except I didn't know it was evidence. All I saw was a quilt stuffed into a place it didn't belong. I wanted to see if I could get it back to its owner."

Jennifer pulled a heavy flashlight from her belt and knelt to shine it into the space.

"Don't touch anything," Hal said. "They'll be sending out a detective, and you know how they can be."

"I'm not touching anything," Jennifer said as she shone the light around the interior.

Drawn by curiosity, April moved closer. She noticed Hal did the same, despite his warning to Jennifer. The crack in the wall offered limited access for the light. At first, they saw only glimpses of the body's clothes. Then the light fell on the woman's face.

April gasped. "I know that face!"

Hal touched April's arm, making her jump. "You know this woman?"

"I've never met her. But I know who she is. At least, I think I do. I believe that is Olga Lowry."

"I don't know who that is," Hal replied.

Jennifer turned off her light and stood. "Olga Lowry is a writer. Historical mysteries. And I agree with April. That's her. She did a reading at the bookstore not too long ago. I really enjoyed it."

"That's where I saw her too," April said. "Though I would have recognized her from her author photos as well. I have all her books."

"So you've met the victim?" Hal asked, his gaze shifting between the two women.

Jennifer shook her head. "No one met her. She didn't exactly welcome fan attention. She seemed like a generally unpleasant person at the time."

"That's what I thought too," April said, before flashing a guilty glance toward the mausoleum. "I suppose the reading could have been the exception. She might have been a pleasant person most of the time."

Hal waved off the last part and focused his steely eyes on April. "Did you interact with Olga Lowry outside the bookstore event?"

"No. I know Rebecca tried to get her to do an interview with the newspaper, but she wouldn't." April directed the next remark at Jennifer. "Rebecca called her an unpleasant person too, only a bit more bluntly. We heard about it around the office for weeks."

Hal perked up, raising his pen over the pad where he'd been taking notes. "Rebecca was angry with the deceased?"

April rolled her eyes. "Not angry, more like annoyed. You've met Rebecca. She's annoyed with half the population of New Holly at any given time. She doesn't kill them."

Hal paid her no obvious attention, still scribbling on the pad, and April stifled a groan. Rebecca would not be thrilled that April had made her a person of interest.

April was still trying to figure out how to undo what she'd done when a stranger strode toward them, dressed in a suit and tie. April suspected the man would be handsome if not for the grumpy twist to his lips as he surveyed the two

officers and her. Finally, he shifted direction and strode directly to her. He pulled out a badge. "Detective David Vane," he said. "Why are you here?"

"She discovered the body," Hal offered from over the detective's shoulder.

Vane spun to face the officer. "I meant why she is so close to my crime scene?"

"We were interviewing Miss York," Hal replied. Though Hal's tone was polite, April could detect a note of strain. She didn't blame Hal. She thought the detective was obnoxious.

"Also," April cut in, "*she* can speak for herself perfectly well. I don't mind leaving your crime scene. It's not as if I don't have work to do."

The detective shifted his focus back to her, and April noticed his brown eyes, the only warm thing about the man. "Where do you work, Miss York?"

"*The New Holly Dispatch.*"

The expression of mild disapproval morphed into anger on the man's face. He spun and barked at Hal. "I want this reporter *out* of my crime scene." Then he turned back and pointed at April, his finger nearly close enough for her to touch. She resisted the urge to flick it away. "I better not see anything about this in the newspaper. This is not your chance for career advancement."

She hadn't had the slightest thought of the poor writer's death being a great opportunity for her own career, and she was deeply offended by his comment. "I didn't think it was. Besides, you might have forgotten, Detective, but this is America, where the right of free speech is protected by the Constitution."

"This is my crime scene," he shot back. "Where there are no rights unless I give them. Would you prefer to be arrested for interfering in a criminal investigation?"

"I'm a *witness*. It's not like I popped by because I saw police cars."

“Fine,” he said, making a clear effort to modulate his tone. “You witnessed. You were interviewed.” He gestured at Hal. “You have her details.”

“I do,” Hal said, shooting April a glance that clearly begged her to stop fighting with the detective.

“Then you may go, Miss York.”

Her gaze shifted from Hal’s pleading eyes to Jennifer’s expression of disgust at the detective’s high-handed manner, and she decided not to make anything more difficult for the police officers. They worked hard, and she admired them both. The detective, on the other hand, was not on her “good” list. With a curt nod, she stalked out of the cemetery.

Her irritation fueled most of the trek back to work. She muttered about Detective Vane under her breath for several blocks before making a conscious decision to think about something else.

Since she was already late, she decided to go all in on testing Rebecca’s temper and popped into the coffee shop a few doors down from the newspaper office. She bought a vanilla chai and sipped it as she prepared to face her boss.

She arrived to find the front door to the office locked, as it often was. They didn’t have a receptionist, and Rebecca insisted that the public should contact them via e-mail or phone, not bother them during work hours. April fished the keys out of her purse and let herself in, locking the door behind her. The tiny reception area held a single, battered metal desk and several file cabinets.

The desk was empty except for piles of paper. They tended to accumulate until someone found time to catch up on the filing, which usually only happened when the mounds toppled over and made the area a walking hazard.

April chose not to feel guilty about the definite lean she saw to one of the stacks as she hurried on to the larger room where her desk and Maddy’s were both empty. She was struck by how unnaturally quiet the office was with only the

soft hum of the electronics and the eerie buzz of the unbalanced ceiling fan. April set her foam cup on her desk and surveyed Maddy's nearby workstation. Her monitor was dark, so Maddy had been away from it long enough for the power saving mode to kick in.

April couldn't remember Maddy saying anything about leaving the office.

Where is she?

Her gaze swept the room again, passing over the single larger table with several folding chairs set around it. That table was used for meetings of the whole staff—which meant not a lot of chairs were required. More filing cabinets of mismatched sizes and styles were lined up on one wall. The only ornamentation in the room were framed photos that had run in the paper, most of them taken by April.

She crossed the room and tapped lightly on the door to Rebecca's office. Hearing no answer, she peeked in. Rebecca's desk was empty except for one pile of papers, two empty coffee mugs, and a stuffed cat. April had no idea where the stuffed cat had originated, but she knew Rebecca called it Ralph and claimed it was a better boyfriend than her ex.

Maybe Maddy and Rebecca are having coffee out back.

They had an old, wobbly picnic table that they sometimes used when the weather wasn't dreadful, or when Rebecca wanted to scold someone over coffee. Knowing Maddy's habit of riling up Rebecca for fun, they could easily be having a heart-to-heart at the picnic table.

April headed down the narrow hall that led to both the restroom and the back door. The hall was dimly lit, and not for the first time April thought they should spring for a higher-watt bulb in the single fixture near the door.

She hesitated at the back door, then decided she'd wash her hands before talking to her friends. She'd handled the soiled quilt and touched a dead body. At that thought, her need to wash her hands became urgent. She pushed open

the restroom door and it creaked, making her jump. After her harrowing experience, being alone in the office with nothing but creepy noises was doing nothing to settle her nerves.

“Pull it together, April,” she muttered, heading for the sink.

In her own defense, discovering bodies wasn’t part of her usual day. She took a quick look at herself in the mirror as she washed her hands. She was pale and the scatter of freckles across her nose stood out starkly. After she washed her hands several times, she splashed water on her face, hoping the cold would bring some color to her cheeks at least.

She dried off with paper towels and pulled the hair tie out of her ponytail before regathering it into something smoother. Finally, she figured that was about the best she could do for her appearance and headed out of the bathroom.

She’d barely entered the shadowy hallway when a figure stepped into her peripheral vision and grabbed her arm.

April screamed.

Murder by the Block

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